

ARTS AND CULTURE

In Defense of Authentic Elitism

Neomi Rao • Book Review

WHAT IS BOURGEOIS MERITOCRACY? Probably what William A. Henry III calls elitism.

In this age of affirmative action, women's rights, special rights for the handicapped and welfare for the indigent and lazy, elitism is a forgotten and embarrassing concept. Elitist ideals and social hierarchies are something from an unenlightened past. In our new feel-good era, everybody is okay, and political and academic standards

For example, he writes that triumphant egalitarianism appears in cultural changes "from the relentless debunking of heroes and heroism to the universal self-celebration of the masses via home Polaroids and camcorders, call-in radio shows and instant polls ... and even (oh mercifully waning fad!) karaoke machines."

Certainly, our consumer culture indulges the whims of the masses, but this has nothing to do with

ration or circumstance which produces an authentic elite. Unable to appreciate the true nature of an elite, Henry writes that the defense of elitism "is ultimately nothing more than the defense of common sense."

The discussion of ideology in education in a chapter on "Good Old Golden Rule Days," comes closest to defining a concrete problem. Henry paints a frightening portrait of schools across the nation—the "dumbing down" of curricula, the emphasis on psychological counseling and the decline in learning as measured by standardized tests. Here, with convincing anecdotes and statistics, Henry presents an area of society in which traditional values have been noticeably abandoned in the name of diversity and political correctness. His examples of top-notch college students' ignorance are startling despite their familiarity.

Henry takes to task such recent innovations as the "Afrocentric" curricula, which teaches from texts filled with outright lies about the African past. Such an education, Henry argues, "breeds children who are resentful, hostile, even paranoid. It fosters a pseudo-racial pride not far removed from hatred." Even worse, targeted curricula make children suspicious of mainstream information sources which, despite their occasional bias, still serve as a unifying source of society's information.

Unfortunately, Henry still applies the utilitarian calculus to his so-called "elite" values, which are not goods in themselves—Henry argues for their inclusion on the basis that elite values will produce

gued against affirmative action, saying that it only frustrates black students not prepared for highly competitive universities. Rather than throwing black students into unfair situations, Sowell argues that they should attend schools at their level of preparation in order to succeed.

Henry speaks strongly against group rights and group thinking, which encourage a victim mentality. In a rare show of wisdom, he writes, "Perhaps it is time to stop thinking of blacks—and having them think of themselves—as a category. Let them rise or fall as individuals. That would be, in the moral and metaphysical sense, an affirmative action." Any individual of talent, he reasons, should be able to succeed.

But the subtle must give way to the ridiculous, and Henry launches into a critique of Afrocentrism in the academy, targeting "scholars" such as Leonard Jeffries who raged about whites being "ice people" while tenured at the City College of New York. Although Henry accurately complains about the half-lies being taught to young children—that blacks invented the light bulb, the telephone and the elevator—he makes a deeper attack on what he considers the teaching of the "nonrational."

While children should not be taught lies to make them "feel good" about their heritage, there are other viewpoints and standards besides the rationalistic Western one. Or rather, the Western tradition itself embraces experiments in the nonrationalistic, artistic and free-flowing. To reduce our European heritage to the Protestant work ethic is to ignore the multifaceted nature of all that our history has contained.

Henry complains that multiculturalism is the ultimate *reductio ad absurdum*. But he makes a similar move when he baldly asserts "America has many races. It needs only one culture." Has America ever had only one culture? Some shared principles perhaps, but one unified culture has never existed in this country.

"Why Can't a Man Be More Like a Woman?" asks Henry in his misguided chapter about feminism. Henry reduces the various schools of feminism to one brand, the so-called nurture feminists who seek to bring the "feminine principle" into society, replacing what they consider to be male models of rationality. Oblivious to any social or economic reality, Henry writes that we live in "a world in which women voluntarily take on a disproportionate share of domestic worries."

Henry makes child-bearing out to be an entirely voluntary and marginal activity, and argues that working mothers reduce competitiveness. He goes so far as to argue that the rules of the workplace should not be changed at all for those who "inevitably impose a disadvantage." While this might

be true in the most narrow utilitarian sense, Henry betrays a sensitivity to human reality.

Henry gets only partially on track when he argues against the shoddy standards of a meritocratic scholarship, which attempts to replicate a rich history of female achievement where none exists.

He writes, "You could eliminate every woman writer, painter, composer from the canon and the present moment and not significantly deform the course of Western culture." Granted, the rhetoric to make people mad that also contains a kernel of truth.

On higher education, Henry argues that ideology and market forces have caused professors to sell out to the popular. In talking about gay studies he writes that a student majoring in such a subject would have difficulty finding a job, and "the same caveat applies to all ideologically based and impractical studies."

Well, "impractical" studies could also include, subjects such as humanities, classics, literature and history, which do not have any apparent marketing power. Henry's commitment to scholarship seems suspect when he supports choosing a major based on ability to get a student a job, and then criticizes those same market forces for corrupting professors. When should the dictates of the market be followed?

Definitely not, says Henry, in the realm of culture, where "the emphasis on tribalism, tokenism, and toeing the political line, is more painful." Culture should represent the highest aspirations of individuals, and be judged on similarly lofty standards. But Henry seems again to mistake the heights of the true cultural elite. His standards are not those of genius, but those of hard work and practice.

In comparing square dancing and blues to ballet and opera, Henry does not invoke the sublime, but rather argues against square dancing and blues that "the techniques are less arduous and less demanding of long learning, the underlying symbolic language is less complicated, the range of expression is less profound, and the worship of beauty is muddled by the lower aims of community fellowship. Above all, these arts are less intellectual—less cerebral, less abstract, less of a test."

Indeed, in the arts in which Henry finds egalitarianism most objectionable, he also makes his most mundane argument, reducing great works to an intellectual test.

Throughout *In Defense of Elitism*, Henry fails to understand the nature of individual greatness and genius required by the elite. His narrow and self-righteous celebration of bourgeois meritocracy betrays the noble title of his book and its calling.

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In Defense of Elitism
William A. Henry III
Doubleday
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can adjust to accommodate anyone.

Henry's book *In Defense of Elitism* diagnoses the problems of American culture as a battle between elitism and egalitarianism, in which egalitarianism has taken the upper hand in all sectors of society, politics and education ... with disastrous results. While many of his criticisms ring true, Henry's definition of elitism falls short. He discusses not simply a choice segment of society and its failings, but rather the loss of solid middle class values throughout our culture. His muddled analysis of contemporary problems wavers between a strong distaste for MTV and unabashed support for advancement through merit. Henry, a self-professed card-carrying Democrat, thinks things have gone too far.

elitism. Gimmicks have always been sold to the general public—it's simply a result of capitalism and technology in a largely middle class society. The elite still attend the symphony and opera and visit art museums. Henry might find consumer culture aesthetically distasteful, but the consumption of trash has little to do with elitism. Henry mistakenly perceives the recent past as a bastion of morality, self-discipline and impeccable middle class taste.

Henry's rhetoric forces readers to waver between agreement and nausea. He makes some salient points about the pervasive relativism in our society, which ignores a rich Western heritage in the struggle to include all viewpoints and offend no one. But Henry's dismissive tone often makes him seem more like Rush Limbaugh

Henry wrongly equates values for the masses with the uncommon inspiration or circumstance which produces as authentic elite. Unable to appreciate the true nature of an elite, Henry writes that the defense of elitism "is ultimately nothing more than the defense of common sense."

The central argument of the book is this: personal responsibility and the Puritan work ethic should prevail in all sectors of society, and academic, social and political advancement should be based on merit. That such prosaic, albeit laudable, values have been placed under the rubric of *elitism* indicates the true decline of elite values in our society.

Henry's polemic reaches its height in the opening chapter, entitled "The Vital Lie," in which he explains how egalitarianism has taken over America. One gets the sense that Henry wrote a virulent editorial piece and then transformed it into a book. His unsophisticated, though snappy, sound-bites and some of his self-righteous rhetoric are bound to get under the skin of even the most sympathetic reader.

than a serious critic of modern thinking. Henry writes condescendingly, "It is scarcely the same thing to put a man on the moon as to put a bone in your nose." Ironically, Henry's one-liners could speak only to an audience accustomed to the dumbed-down media, hardly people concerned with maintaining elite values.

Henry misses the traditional definition of elite (Webster's defines it as the "choice part or segment"). Elite values do not necessarily apply to all people, they apply only to the elite who have distinguished themselves by their intelligence, genius, or talent. Elites are not simply workaholics jumping through the hoops of the system. Society should encourage hard work, effort and practice, but Henry wrongly equates values for the masses with the uncommon inspi-

an elite. Standards of merit and achievement should be applied to our children, but this is merely a basic requirement for a liberal society. When basic ideals are defended for the sake of their so-called elitism, they only push aside the true standards of excellence required of the elite.

The bane of all good elitists—affirmative action—does not escape Henry's polemic. In a chapter entitled "Affirmative Confusion," he follows many of the standard arguments against quotas and affirmative hiring for women and minorities. He defends competition over quotas, which is smart, but hardly revolutionary.

Henry cites black economists Thomas Sowell and Walter Williams for principles largely ignored in the traditional media establishment. Sowell has vehemently ar-

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